



ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION IN COLORADO:

Recommendations for Improving State Outcomes
for Opportunity Youth



DONNELL-KAY
FOUNDATION

Executive Summary

Youth ages 16-24 who have either dropped out of high school or are not participating in the workforce have become recognized nationally as “opportunity youth.” In their efforts to finish high school and start a career path, these students often face severe personal and academic challenges including pregnancy, drug addiction, homelessness, psychological and behavior problems, low skill levels, and boredom. Schools serving these youth face unique challenges for meeting students’ academic needs when personal challenges are so immense. Colorado is not alone in struggling to meet the challenges presented by this population, especially in the current Alternative Education Campus (AEC) system. In response to the recent Jobs for the Future report entitled “Reinventing Alternative Education: An Assessment of Current State Policy,” the Donnell-Kay Foundation has issued seven key recommendations for improving alternative education for opportunity youth in Colorado:

COMMON LANGUAGE: The State should convene key stakeholders to determine a common definition of the “alternative student” that is focused not only on student’s personal challenges, but also their academic needs.

QUALITY CONTROL: The State should take on an increased role in ensuring quality alternative options, including providing incentives for serving the population, promoting innovation, and adapting accountability measures.

INCREASE RIGOR: Increasing the academic rigor of AECs requires clearer school missions/definitions, removing accountability disincentives for districts to take on alternative schools, providing incentives for advanced coursework, revising the performance indicator framework for AECs, and alignment with Common Core Standards.

MODIFY FUNDING: The State should consider revising funding mechanisms for AECs, including multiple student count dates, a consideration of the additional cost of serving this population, and leveraging federal turnaround funds.

IMPROVE QUALITY OF STAFF & LEADERSHIP: As AECs serve some of the most challenging students, mechanisms should be in place to ensure they do not become a repository for poorly performing teachers. Those receiving poor evaluations or performance ratings should be prohibited from working in AECs; and teachers and leaders in AECs should receive professional development specific to meeting the needs of this population.



ENHANCE WRAPAROUND SUPPORT: Financial and accountability incentives should be in place for schools to engage in outcome based partnerships with government, social service, or non-profit organizations that help meet the needs of students in AECs.

PROMOTE INNOVATION AND NEW SCHOOLS: The Charter Schools Institute and local districts should be able to authorize a limited number of new, breakthrough school models that have incentives to partner with a myriad of organizations (e.g. higher education, non-profits, and other community based organizations); additional funding; flexibility around seat time; and quality blended learning.

Opportunity youth represent some of the most difficult students to serve in the traditional education system. The current system overseeing AECs predates our enhanced accountability framework and Common Core alignment. The State needs to help build capacity for AECs to refocus on improved academic rigor, promote learning gains, and provide necessary wraparound services.

All students deserve a high quality education to ensure they will graduate high school prepared for a career and post-secondary success. This goal has proven particularly challenging for students farthest off the graduation track. Nationally, this population is referred to as “opportunity youth” and defined as 16 to 24-year olds who have either never been in school or employed after the age of 16, or they have not progressed through post-secondary education or secured a stable job¹. Colorado has the potential to be a leader in ensuring that opportunity youth have access to top-notch educational options that provide accelerated learning in a variety of settings strategic to a student’s educational needs. Some are personalized, use blended learning, partner with Job Corps programs, are early college models, or provide flexible scheduling, to name a few.

In Colorado, “alternative education” is a catch-all phrase for several school models that mostly serve students with challenging life circumstances. Policy development however, lags behind the expansion of alternative education. Further analysis is required for alternative schools around eligibility, funding, accountability, attracting talent, and encouraging innovation to better serve this population.

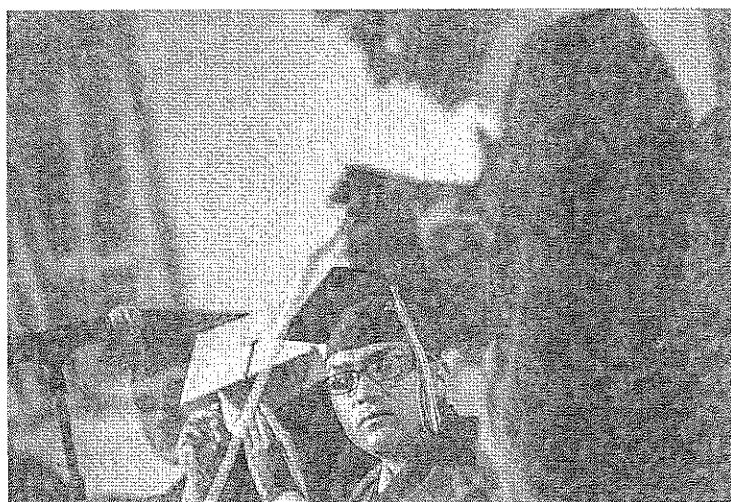
In 2002, the Colorado General Assembly passed a law allowing schools that serve special needs and high-risk populations to be designated as Alternative Education Campuses (AECs).² The state evaluation system³ for AECs highlights their troubling performance:

2011-2012 SCHOOL YEAR (76⁴ AECs)

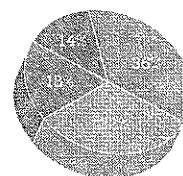
- 27 AECs received the “performance” rating (highest level)⁵
- 49 AECs received some type of improvement rating, with 11 (of the 49) receiving a turnaround designation

A look at dropout rates⁶ reveals the challenges associated with student success at AECs:

- 15% 2010-2011 AEC dropout rate
- 2% 2010-2011 all non-AEC schools dropout rate



2011 AEC OUTCOMES



Performance	36%
Improvement	32%
Priority Improvement	18%
Turnaround	14%

Source: Colorado Department of Education

¹ For purpose of this report, Opportunity youth will refer only to 16-24 year olds, the maximum age for which Colorado schools can receive public dollars to provide educational services. Some special education students may receive funding until age 24.

² The Educational Accountability Act of 2009 (SB-163) authorized the Colorado Department of Education to conduct an annual review for the performance of public schools in the state, including alternative education campuses. The 2011-2012 School Performance Framework released in December by the state was the second year for evaluating AECs.

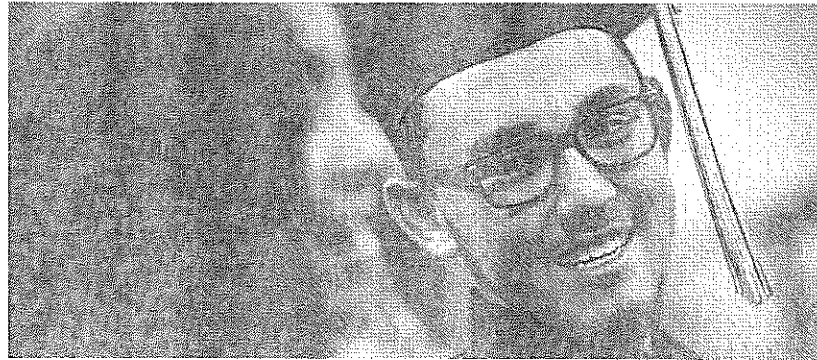
³ All AECs receive data on the traditional School Performance Framework (SPF), but accountability is based on a separate AEC SPF, using three of the same performance indicators and one that is modified. Improvement planning, expectations, and consequences are the same as for traditional schools, but there are different weights then for traditional schools. Within indicators, the AECs use many of the same measures and metrics but different cut-points. Districts may opt to submit supplemental measures for CDE's review. Denver Public Schools and Boulder Public Schools use a district performance framework to evaluate their alternative schools. <http://www.cde.state.co.us/Accountability/StateAccountabilityAEC.aspx>

⁴ These designations are somewhat misleading because several top-ranked schools were missing data in many of the growth and performance categories – often due to low student numbers.

⁵ In 2011-2012 there were 79 AECs in the state, but 3 closed so only 76 received ratings.

⁶ The Colorado dropout rate is an annual rate, reflecting the percentage of all students enrolled in grades 7-12 who leave school during a single school year without subsequently attending another school or educational program.

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There were approximately 76 AECs in Colorado during the 2011-2012 school year. These schools serve about 14,418 students, or almost 6% of the high school aged population in the state (Note: some AECs serve younger students, but it is a very small number).

Evaluating student success in AECs is both complicated and controversial. It is important to examine how our state's accountability system can be improved, but it is also *critical* to re-examine policies governing alternative education to ensure students have quality options.

AECs serve a wide variety of students largely based on social service issues rather than academic issues, and for this reason, state policy needs to get much clearer about why these schools exist and if they are designed to serve opportunity youth. Plus, the vision for alternative education in Colorado needs to happen in the context of common core standards coming into effect as well as next generation learning models and opportunities.

The Donnell-Kay Foundation suggests several areas for review within alternative education. Our recommendations are based on a [Jobs for the Future \(JFF\)](#) document called: [Reinventing Alternative Education: An Assessment of Current State Policy](#).

Of the 76 AECs across the state:

- 18 are charter schools
- 4 run by a BOCES (Boards of Cooperative Educational Services)
- 1 run by the state
- 1 is online
- 1 is run by the Charter School Institute (CSI)
- 51 run by school districts

KEY TO ACTION DESIRED



Change Required:
Legislative



Change Required:
CDE/State



Change Required:
CSI/ School District

CDE=
Colorado Department of Education

CSI=
Charter School Institute

Create Clearer Eligibility Requirements

Change Required:



JFF's Promising Practice suggests states broaden and at the same time refocus eligibility guidelines for alternative students, going beyond a concentration on troublesome, disruptive youth, or social/emotional factors in a students' life, to include *any* student who is not thriving in a traditional high school setting. DK supports using academic indicators as the primary measures to determine whether or not a student needs an alternative setting (e.g. overage, under credit).

During the 2011 Colorado legislative session, HB 11-1277 passed and was signed into law, expanding the AEC eligibility criteria to include students who are under credited relative to their age and grade level. This is a welcome change in the law, providing an increased focus on students who are struggling academically.

However, there is misalignment at the state level about how alternative schools are defined. Until recently, Colorado law required an AEC to serve a specific student population; the focus had been much more on students with social issues rather than academic issues. Colorado also defines what type (and percentage) of students can constitute an AEC; currently, a school must have either 95% "high-risk" students and/or serve 95% special education students.

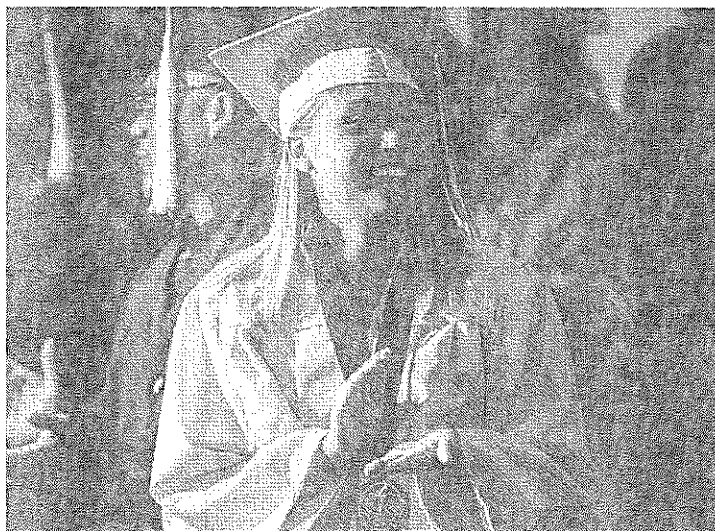
HOW IS HIGH-RISK DEFINED?

Pursuant to Colo. Rev. Stat. 22-7-604.5, High-Risk students fit into at least one of the following categories:

- Prior dropout
- Adjudication
- Expulsion
- Chronic suspensions
- Pregnant/parenting
- Drug/alcohol abuse
- Gang involvement or affiliation
- Adjudicated parent
- Domestic violence in family
- Victim of abuse/neglect
- Migrant (added 2010)
- Homeless (added 2010)
- Severe psychiatric or behavioral disorders (added 2010)
- Over-aged and under-credited (added 2011)



The "high risk" criteria primarily define experiences in the students' lives or other social service issues rather than academic issues, but the state largely does not consider social service outcomes in its accountability system. There needs to be a shift towards driving academic achievement and graduation rates as the criteria for eligibility and accountability.



There is an increasing trend across the country to define opportunity youth by their academic experiences rather than demographic or life characteristics. For example, the U.S. Department of Education is beginning to include students that are over-age, under-credited in designating high needs students within funding programs such as Race to the Top. Many advocacy groups working with this population also suggest using academic indicators to define the population. For example the Parthenon Group's research in New York City shows that academic factors, rather than socioeconomic or demographic, are more powerful predictors of dropping out (Allensworth and Easton 2007; Neild and Balfanz 2007).

Recommendation:

The state should convene key stakeholders to establish a new definition of opportunity youth and the schools that serve them and to discuss whether the 95% at-risk threshold is appropriate in defining AECs. The group should identify ways to prioritize academic "at-risk" indicators, including school design elements that ensure the life circumstance factors with this population are addressed but not at the expense of academics.



Craft Clearer Guidelines Around Quality

Change Required



JFF advocates that states should give districts clear guidelines on quality standards by which to operate and manage AECs, while still allowing local flexibility to address local conditions and student needs for alternative education. The areas that should be covered include eligibility, effective practices, funding mechanisms, governance, accountability, and staffing.

As a local control state, Colorado provides ample flexibility for school districts to design and run alternative programs and schools to meet the needs of their populations. It is important to balance this flexibility with quality standards. Other states have taken steps to define quality standards and indicators for their alternative education schools. Some examples include: ensuring there is at least one alternative program in a district for students at-risk and establishing a fair and equitable process for assigning students to these programs.

One positive movement in Colorado is the state's alternative school performance framework for AECs. The state provides minimum guidelines, and districts are free to use more rigorous accountability measures if desired.

Recommendation

DK recommends increasing the state role in alternative education to ensure there are quality alternative options and experiences for students.

Colorado should consider placing some quality standards on its AECs and incenting them to better serve an at-risk population through funding, innovation, and accountability measures (more detail provided in the sections below).

Oklahoma Case Study

Oklahoma can serve as a guide, with its 17 research-based components for quality alternative schools. Some include: specific student teacher ratios, teaching faculty that qualify them for successful work with at-risk students, courses that meet the curricular standards as adopted by the Oklahoma State Board of Education, individualized instruction, and graduation plans. Oklahoma also requires annual evaluations of its alternative programs, which have shown these schools to be much more successful with this population than traditional schools.



Strengthen Accountability Measures For AECs

Change Required:



JFF Promising Practice says states should allow alternative programs the flexibility they need to move students along the proficiency-based pathways, while ensuring that the programs expect students to meet the common statewide standards. States also should give alternative programs credit within the state's accountability system for reengaging and holding onto students, and for hitting key benchmarks toward common graduation and college-readiness standards.

DK agrees with the need to hold AECs to high standards while also giving them credit for hitting key college-ready benchmarks and milestones. Finding this balance is important. CDE recently issued policy guidance for AECs around accountability, and while there were some very positive aspects to this framework, we also suggest increasing rigor over time and keeping student-focused comparisons across schools and districts. Instead of lowering the bar of expectations, it is essential to provide AECs more time and support to get students where they need to be.

Recommendation

First, alternative education has been used as a catch-all phrase even though it includes a range of models with very different missions that likely lead to correspondingly different outcomes.

Accountability policies for AECs in Colorado can be strengthened by creating a few clear categories for different school missions. The accountability system should then reflect those missions or anticipated outcomes.

A few areas that might serve as model categories include: Multiple Pathways to Graduation/ Dropout Recovery schools, GED Plus / GED Options schools, Transitional schools, and Special Population (SPED) schools.

Second, currently when district accountability ratings are calculated by the state, instead of the alternative accountability system rolling up as the measure of success, the alternative schools are judged by the traditional framework. This policy needs to be changed so there is no disincentive for districts to have alternative schools. This can be particularly harmful in small and medium sized districts that have alternative schools because the number of alternative students - as a percentage of the district's total population - can more deeply impact overall ratings.

DK recommends that the state's alternative accountability framework provide more innovative measures, coupled with increased rigor. The number of optional measures should be limited to avoid watering down the framework, but including key measurable and meaningful indicators will help paint the picture of how well a school is serving its students. Over time, it should address:

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- Raising cut points for student growth, attendance rates, graduation/completion rates and ACT scores.
- Better aligning school missions with outcomes (e.g. if a school's mission is to graduate students, then reporting the graduation rate, ideally a 6- or 7-year rate, should be required).
- Providing points to schools that enroll (and have success with) students in AP, IB courses, dual enrollment, and early college models.
- Weighting the hardest-to-serve students so schools get more credit for advancing them (three or more years behind, SPED, ELL, etc.).
- Providing bonus points for schools that successfully re-enroll dropouts and for an "innovation" category – which would create incentives for modifying or redesigning education delivery to provide better outcomes for youth (see page 11).
- Including a stabilization rate (i.e., remaining in the same alternative school for a certain period of time such as a semester or 6 months).
- Strengthening the state's current Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness category by making all current optional measures required.
- Aligning AEC curriculum to Common Core standards.

CURRENT AEC PERFORMANCE INDICATORS & DATA	
Performance Indicator	Performance Data
Academic Achievement 15%	CSAP proficient and advanced (reading, mathematics, science and writing) + <i>optional measure(s)</i>
Academic Growth 35%	Median and adequate student growth percentile (reading, mathematics and writing) on CSAP + <i>optional measure(s)</i>
Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness 30%	Dropout Rate, Average Colorado ACT Composite Score, Completion rate + <i>optional measure(s)</i>
Student Engagement 20%	Attendance Rate, Truancy Rate + <i>optional measure(s)</i>

Source: Colorado Department of Education

Enrich AEC Funding

Change Required:



JFF encourages states to develop funding policies that channel more resources toward opportunity youth, taking into account that alternative education programs must not only reengage students but also accelerate their learning and provide intensive academic and social supports to help them succeed.

Under the current School Finance Act in Colorado, the formula calls for additional funding for “at-risk” students. Statute defines “at-risk” as students who are eligible for free lunch or students with limited English skills. For secondary students, better proxies exist. Indicators that focus more on academic “at-risk” factors include students off-track by grade level relative to their age or off-track to finishing high school. As earlier described, indicators such as attendance, behavior, and course credit accrual are much better predictors of need than demographics alone (Allensworth and Easton 2007).

New York City Case Study

In New York City, in grades K-5, a poverty proxy is used to determine funding, meaning students who qualify for free and reduced lunch or students who receive public assistance. In grades 6-12, there is an academic proxy that classifies students who are either well below achievement standards and/or below achievement standards (bigger weights are added for students in the “well below” category). This is an example of how Colorado could assign weights based on academic proficiency.

Source: NYC Fair Student Funding Guide 2007

Recommendation

DK recommends rethinking the way dollars are allocated to AEC students as part of the modernization the School Finance Act. Resources should follow students and the state should move towards a more accurate and timely funding system (e.g. multiple count dates), whereby the economic incentives focus on student success and need. While efforts are still underway to determine how much more an opportunity youth costs, DK supports providing targeted additional resources to support these students.

The state should also consider how Federal turnaround improvement grant funds could be used as a source of funding to support closing, reconstituting or developing new, better options for this population of students.

Improve the Quality of Staff & Leadership

Change Required:



Following a JFF promising practice recommendation for all states, Colorado should seek to improve the quality of alternative schools by improving the quality of instructional staff and leadership. It should also provide incentives for high-performing teachers and leaders to join alternative education programs. Colorado currently does not have any state level incentives or policies in place to support high quality AEC staff.

Recommendation:

DK recommends that, at a minimum, teachers who receive poor evaluations or performance ratings (per SB10-191) be prohibited from working in alternative education schools. Further, policies should be considered that incent better training, support, and professional development for high quality staff to work in these more challenging environments. Similar policies should be put in place for schools leaders to ensure high quality principals are leading AECs.

Enhance Support & Wraparound Services

Change Required:



JFF Promising Practice notes states should formally recognize that academic success is virtually impossible for alternative education students without meaningful support services. States should provide funding and other incentives for districts and schools to partner with outside organizations that specialize in these areas to ensure that students receive the full range of needed supports.

Colorado currently has limited federal, state, and local funds to support its highest need students. A few grant programs, including the Expelled and At-Risk Services Grants, the School Counselor Corps Grants, McKinney-Vento Act and the Tony Gramscas Youth Services Program Grant, are examples of important yet limited and disconnected funding streams that support our most at-risk students. Colorado has a high number of non-profit entities that do support schools, yet these organizations (in partnership with the schools and school districts) could be more strategic about their targeted use of data to identify and support struggling students and have more of an outcomes based focus.



Chicago Case Study

The Youth Connections Charter School (YCCS) in Chicago oversees a network of 21 alternative schools in Chicago. YCCS has been able to leverage an additional \$2,360 per student (on top of the average roughly \$7,500 per student) for many of its schools. Additional funds have been raised by leveraging and combining funding streams such as Workforce Investment, children and family service, juvenile justice, truancy prevention, and community college funding dollars, to name a few.

Recommendation:

DK recommends providing more resources for AECs as stated in the finance section (some of which could be used for wraparound support services). In addition, to promote outcomes-based partnerships, schools should be given credit as part of their accountability framework for providing or partnering with youth-serving organizations to realize positive outcomes for the affective needs of their students.

Engaging the governmental, social service, and non-profit sectors in this endeavor is critical, especially in this time of shrinking school budgets. Incentives should also be considered for leveraging and pooling local, state, and federal resources to more effectively serve students in need. Providing incentives for developing partnerships – as well as clear outcomes for those partnerships – is important. Schools could receive additional points based on meeting defined and agreed upon outcomes for this measure, if included in an accountability system.

Provide Support For Innovation & New School Development

Change Required:



States should implement strategic and comprehensive efforts to invent educational models that improve outcomes for opportunity youth and to spread those that prove successful, according to JFF. States have a responsibility to provide the models and funding that support this kind of large-scale innovation.

In Colorado, new school development has largely been left up to the local communities, so there are few state programs or incentives to fulfill this goal. According to the JFF report, Oklahoma and Minnesota have set the policy conditions necessary to encourage the development and sustainability of innovative alternative models. They also have provided funding to sustain these initiatives. As a result, they have strong statewide alternative networks and have seen an increase in performance outcomes for these schools. DK recommends for examining the policy environment to support school improvement for existing AECs, and also to pave the way for new, higher quality options.

Recommendation:

DK recommends enabling CSI and local districts to authorize a limited number of charter or innovation AECs focused on providing students with a high quality education experience, ensuring they are college and career ready. A framework for conditions around students served, school design, wraparound support services, additional funding, and refined accountability would be required. Annual reporting would take place, with a thorough evaluation of these schools after year five.

In terms of innovation, DK recommends creating maximum flexibility with regards to seat time regulations. Since next generation learning, including online/blended, competency-based and adaptive computer-based instruction, all promise enormous opportunity for better serving the vulnerable students that AECs serve outside of traditional time constraints.

There is also a need to incent innovation through the AEC accountability framework, for schools to modify or redesign their educational delivery services to have better overall outcomes for youth. The AEC should not be punished if the innovation doesn't work, so it would be more productive to think of them as bonus points. It would also be possible to design performance indicators for the innovation category that would encourage schools to address gaps or challenges, such as providing educational continuity for students with very high mobility.

The key towards transforming this network of schools involves providing incentives, including extra dollars for AECs to transform themselves to better meet student needs as well as attracting new, high quality providers to Colorado.

Conclusion

Colorado's new alternative accountability system reveals that academic outcomes for this population generally are poor and there is a great need for policies to drive improved academic outcomes for students in these schools.

The current law designating schools as AECs was developed in 2002, prior to the adoption of the Common Core curriculum, which is an effort to prepare *all* students for college and careers. The current system also was developed before reliable and meaningful measures of school performance existed.

It is critical that the state and districts support both the transformation of existing AECs to meet these new standards as well as incent the development of new alternative schools and networks ready to successfully address this need. The state's AECs need to refocus on a stronger understanding of student academic needs, accelerating learning gains, providing important transitional supports into postsecondary options, and fully integrating strong youth development components into the school design.

Given Colorado's policy environment, commitment to student success for all, and interest in embracing school choice and non-traditional schools, the state can provide a real opportunity for innovative and effective alternative models and learning pathways to emerge for our state's opportunity youth.

